



Rhetoric and CS Lewis

By

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C.S. Lewis is believed by many people to be one of the great intellects of the 20th century. He is also viewed as one of the great rhetoricians of that time.

How can we determine whether someone is a great intellect or great rhetorician?

Let's take a look at the rhetoric of C.S. Lewis from one of his best-known books to see what we can learn from it.

Intellect & Rhetoric

Intellect is defined as “a person’s ability to think and understand esp. ideas at a high level” (Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary © Cambridge University Press) and “the capacity for rational or intelligent thought especially when highly developed” (Merriam-Webster).

Rhetoric is defined as “the art of speaking or writing effectively” (Merriam-Webster) and “The art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the exploitation of figures of speech and other compositional technique” (Oxford Dictionary).

Based on those definitions it would appear that C.S. Lewis was both a great intellect and rhetorician.

C.S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis wrote scores of books and essays during his lifetime. While we know Lewis well from such books as *Screwtape Letters*, *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, one of the most insightful books he wrote is *All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C. S. Lewis*. I like the “Diary” because it is about Lewis as a young atheist in his own words. Lewis wrote in his diary from 1922 – 1927. It was published into book form in 1992.

Another important early work of Lewis while he was an atheist is the poem *Dymer* (J.M. Dent, 1926). He published the book under the name Clive Hamilton. Lewis published a series of poems under the name Clive Hamilton in 1919 (soon after Lewis returned from fighting in World War I). It was titled *Spirits in Bondage* (Heinemann). The book was reprinted in 1984 and

included as part of Lewis' *Collected Poems* in 1994 (Fount Paperbacks). Lewis and his brother wrote as children about an imaginary animal world they called *Boxen*. The stories were compiled into a book many years after Lewis' death (*Boxen: Childhood Chronicles Before Narnia*, Collins, 1985).

Lewis began a journey from atheist to theist and reached that point in 1929 or 1930.

[Alistair McGrath wrote in the 2013 biography, *C. S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*, that Lewis may have been off by one year in his recollection and may have become a theist in Trinity Term of 1930. He based that belief upon careful readings of Lewis' books and letters about that time period.]

“You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England” (Surprised By Joy, ch. 14, p. 266).

How did this happen? How did the strong atheist in Lewis give way to theism? Here’s how Lewis recalled it.

“In reading Chesterton, as in reading MacDonald, I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere — ‘Bibles laid open, millions of surprises’, as Herbert says,

‘fine nets and stratagems’. God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous”. (Surprised By Joy)

Lewis was an avid reader and picked up a volume of essays by G.K. Chesterton –

“I had never heard of him and had no idea of what he stood for; nor can I quite understand why he made such an immediate conquest of me. It might have been expected that my pessimism, my atheism, and my hatred of sentiment would have made him to me the least congenial of all authors.” (Surprised By Joy)

Lewis began attending his parish church on Sundays and college chapel on weekdays –

“... not because I believed in Christianity, nor because I thought the difference between it and simple Theism a small one, but because I thought one ought to ‘fly

one's flag" by some unmistakable overt sign." (Surprised By Joy)

Lewis became a Christian in 1931 with help from close friends, including J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson.

Lewis' first published work as a Christian came two years later with *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism* (1933). He dropped the pseudonym Clive Hamilton and published under his real name for the rest of his life. Other books that followed included *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936), *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938 – the first in Lewis' Space Trilogy), *The Personal Heresy A Controversy* (1939), *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (1939), *The Problem of Pain* (1940), *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"* (1942), *Broadcast Talks* (1942), *Perelandra* (1943 – the second in Lewis' Space Trilogy), *The Abolition of Man*

(1943), *Christian Behaviour* (1943), *Beyond Personality* (1944), *The Great Divorce* (1945) and *That Hideous Strength* (1945 – the third in Lewis' Space Trilogy).

We'll stop with those writings for the purpose of this article, but remember that Lewis continued to write and publish some of the world's most popular books for another 18 years before his death on November 22, 1963 (the same day that Aldous Huxley died and President John F. Kennedy was assassinated).

It would seem that the sheer volume of Lewis' writings from childhood to the end of his life and the powerful influence he had as a professor and lecturer speak powerfully to his great intellect.

Five Canons of Rhetoric

So, how do we determine whether any particular speech or writing is good rhetoric? We have the **Five Canons of Rhetoric** to help us.

Rhetoric has a history of thousands of years and the Five Canons that came from the ancient writings of Greek and Roman orators help guide us to this day in developing and judging good rhetoric.

1. **Invention**
2. **Arrangement**
3. **Style**
4. **Memory**
5. **Delivery**

I. Invention

Invention is the process of finding ways to persuade. Everyone who wants to persuade other people about something they think/believe will go through a rhetoric process. For example, if I want to persuade you that chocolate ice cream is better than vanilla ice cream I will begin with “invention.” I will search for ways to persuade you.

Invention is the process of developing the argument. That’s where we look for material, information, statistics, etc., that we’ll use in your presentation. Using the ice cream example – I would learn how ice cream is made, how many gallons of chocolate and vanilla ice cream are manufactured and sold each year, any consumer studies/surveys done about flavor testing, etc., all with the intention of developing a persuasive argument for chocolate ice cream.

II. Arrangement

The next step in rhetoric is to determine the order in which you will present your argument, whether in writing or speech. This is the structure phase of building a persuasive argument. Outlining is a common way of arranging a paper or talk.

III. Style

Style is the process of determining how you'll present your persuasive argument. Stirring emotions will be part of developing the style even as you focus on the logic of the argument. Drafting and rewriting are common ways of developing style for a paper or talk.

IV. Memory

Memorizing a speech (or at least major points) is a good way to ensure you'll present a complete argument. Being able to keep eye contact with your audience is also a great way to keep the persuasion process personal. If you're writing a paper, being able to remember important things you've read or thought about the topic in the past helps bring the most powerful points to bear in your written persuasion.

V. Delivery

Delivery is where you present your argument through speech or writing. This can include the choice of words, examples, voice strength, gestures, movement in front of the audience, etc. If I were delivering a speech about why chocolate ice cream tastes better than vanilla ice cream, I might open a gallon of each for the audience

and allow them to “taste” my argument. I might also pour chocolate syrup on the vanilla ice cream to make the point that chocolate makes everything better, even ice cream.

The Screwtape Letters

We turn now to a book that started as a newspaper series during World War II. The *Guardian* newspaper was a religious weekly publication in England. The editors published Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* one letter at a time for 31 straight weeks in 1941. The letters became chapters when they were published as a book the next year (1942).

Let's pause for a moment to revisit the process of developing an argument using the Canons of Rhetoric and see how well Lewis used that in *The Screwtape Letters*.

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Screwtape Letters Rhetoric

So, how did Lewis do “rhetorically” with *The Screwtape Letters*?

Let’s compare each of the “canons” with Lewis’ writings.

I. Invention

Lewis was a master at finding ways to persuade people. Keep in mind that he had been a Christian for only ten years when he wrote *The Screwtape Letters*. Yet, he already had a strong idea about Christianity and how it worked and should work. Lewis used what he had learned during the process of converting from atheism to Christianity and reading the Bible along with a decade attending church and talking with other Christians about Christianity and various worldviews (e.g. J.R.R. Tolkien, Hugo Dysen).

Lewis was a professor at Oxford University (Magdalen College) prior to and during the time he wrote *The Screwtape Letters*. He authored several works prior to the *Screwtape* series including *The Pilgrim's Regress*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *The Allegory of Love*, *Rehabilitations and other essays*, *The Personal Heresy*, and *The Problem of Pain*.

Lewis reportedly came up with the idea of a senior demon mailing letters to his young nephew and protege. This meant inventing unique ways that demons would communicate with each other. The topics in the letters were those that people living in England in the early part of the 1940s would have certainly understood.

Was Lewis' inventive technique persuasive? I believe it was. Millions of people have read *The Screwtape Letters* and many have given it high marks for both invention and persuasion.

“A masterpiece of satire, this classic has entertained and enlightened readers the world over with its sly and ironic portrayal of human life from the vantage point of Screwtape, a senior tempter in the service of “Our Father Below.” At once wildly comic, deadly serious, and strikingly original, C. S. Lewis gives us the correspondence of the worldly-wise old devil to his nephew Wormwood, a novice demon in charge of securing the damnation of an ordinary young man. The Screwtape Letters is the most engaging and humorous account of temptation—and triumph over it—ever written.” Goodreads Choice Awards

“The Screwtape Letters, published in 1942, is one of Lewis’s best-loved books—it is probably more widely read than any of his titles, with the exception of Mere Christianity and The Chronicles of Narnia. It might even be said that in certain respects it was the most important book he ever wrote, if only because it ‘made

Lewis a household name,’ according to biographer A. N. Wilson. Would we know Lewis if he had never written Screwtape? Probably. But it’s a little like asking whether we’d know Shakespeare if he had never written Hamlet—removing it from his opus diminishes him. Anybody who has dipped into the book can sense its power. The concept of a devil writing letters to his subordinate is pure genius, and The Screwtape Letters is full of crackling-good prose.” National Review

Search for Screwtape Letters in Google and more than a million websites will be available for you to read more about how inventive and persuasive the book is and has been for many decades.

II. Arrangement

Lewis' "arrangement" is in written form: first by way of a weekly series of columns in a newspaper and second through a book. The form Lewis chose is that of a letter-writing conversation between two demons. The arrangement is orderly and follows a logical process. Each letter (chapter) has its own theme and compares basic strategies of Satan and God. Lewis did not include the letters of the younger demon (Wormwood), but the older demon (Screwtape) referred to the points presented in his nephew's letter.

Lewis communicated Christian truths through the lives of several literary characters:

- The Enemy (God)
- Our Father Below (Satan)
- Screwtape (older demon)
- Wormwood (younger demon)
- The Patient (the human assigned to Wormwood)
- The Woman (Christian and Patient's love interest)
- Slumtrimpet (demon assigned to the Woman)
- The Patient's Mother
- Glubose (demon in charge of patient's mother)
- The Patient's Worldly Friends
- The Vicar
- Slubgob (director of tempters' training college)
- Toadpipe (Screwtape's demon secretary)

These literary characters help Lewis develop a coherent argument for Christianity.

“Few people in 1947 were writing about demons and their ilk, and still fewer believed in them enough to bother speculating on this question: What if we could see what the temptation of our souls looks like through the eyes of the other side? In other words, what if we could interview a demon? That was Lewis’s premise for one of his most durably popular works, perhaps his single most popular work among non-Christian readers; in an ingenious preface, Lewis purports to be beneficiary of the intercepted correspondence of diabolical counsel from a senior devil to an apprentice devil.” CSLewis.com

III. Style

Lewis stirred the emotions through the lives of his literary characters – what they thought, what they believed, what they did, how they acted and reacted. Lewis used “temptation” as a primary tool of demons with humans to present various concepts of how Christians live and should live.

“As an apologist for Christianity, Lewis’s used his imagination to seek fresh ways to communicate orthodox Christian faith. The idea for Screwtape actually occurred to him while he sat in church during a lackluster sermon (an experience with which many men and women might identify).”

It is a classic reversal story—that is, it turns upside down our expectations and affiliations; for example, Satan is revered and referenced as “Our Father Below,” while Jesus is termed, simply, “the Enemy.” By turns comic, sobering, satirical, enlightening, and challenging, Screwtape prepares us to bolster and extend our faith in the face of opposition and deliberate sabotage.” CSLewis.com

IV. Memory

Lewis demonstrated memory in at least two ways.

1. Lewis wrote the Screwtape Letters over a period of many weeks, which necessitated remembering both what he wrote before and what he had intended to write next time. Keeping a consistent flow of thought and purpose when writing a series over a long period of time is challenging.
2. Lewis was consistent in his characterization of Screwtape and what he knew about Wormwood's process along the way.

“Screwtape’s timeless brilliance lies in depicting the everyday and showing how from a demonic point of view, the devotion and care Christians show to their fellow men and women, mirrors of the love God has

shown to them, is unfathomable to the desperately lost and unreflectively wicked.” CSLewis.com

V. Delivery

Lewis' delivery was powerful in written form and it also translated well in speech. The book was adapted into a play many years after Lewis' death and has also been recorded for personal listening by several companies.

“Perhaps the most enduring lesson to be learned from The Screwtape Letters is that diabolical lies can be resisted and refuted by steadfastly holding on to the truth of Who God is, and who we are in Him, and by being knowledgeable and vigilant to oppose the devil’s schemes, through prayer, Scripture, worship, and, most of all, the company we keep.” CSLewis.com